

## **Herhold: Debate over Tutoring Software Puts San Jose's Chief Librarian, Tech-friendly Council member in Odd Roles**

by Scott Herhold, Mercury News Columnist – November 27, 2009

Pierluigi Oliverio consistently throws out the most original thoughts on the San Jose City Council; even if that means that he offends colleagues. He likes to say he owes nothing to established interests. Then again, established interests owe very little to him.

As the council's liaison to the libraries, it was entirely in keeping for Oliverio to post an entry on the San Jose Inside blog ([www.sanjoseinside.com](http://www.sanjoseinside.com)) that took issue with an online tutoring contract proposed by the department head he works with, city librarian Jane Light.

At stake was a plan to spend \$131,000 over the next year — and potentially as much as \$1 million over seven years — on a contract with [Tutor.com](http://Tutor.com), which offers kids help with their homework between 2 p.m. and midnight.

I've checked it out, and the program actually seems like a good one, particularly for thorny topics like calculus or chemistry. It gets raves from kids. The council approved it with a dissent only from Oliverio. So what was his problem?

### **'A great service'**

Essentially, Oliverio was questioning discretionary spending — and looking ahead to a new round of budget cuts next year. He argued that the money for online tutoring could be spent better on keeping a couple of city librarians in their jobs.

"In the end, it's a great service," he told me. "But if you realize you're sitting here with this looming deficit, and you're going to have to lay people off, and you have spending that's discretionary, then hold off."

There was irony to the dust-up: In the first place, Oliverio has been an advocate — at times — of outsourcing, of trying to find different ways for the city to provide service. And few department heads are more sensitive to the impact of layoffs than Light.

### **Some background**

I asked Light for the background on the fight, and she offered a few refinements to Oliverio's take. She pointed out that the program has been around for a while, funded by a state grant that since has expired.

And she points out that online tutoring has obvious benefits. About 2,200 tutoring sessions occur every month, costing the city about \$7 per session. "We know we have a need, and the use is quite high," Light said. "We figured for this year, it's a very useful service."

Oliverio counters that the core mission of the library is to keep as many branches open as long as possible — and certainly, that's what many of his constituents in Willow Glen think. But in a new world, it might actually be online services that anticipate the future.

Light says that if the branches are going to be open only three to four days a week — a distinct possibility given budget cuts — then the library ought to look at various options. In this debate, the council's software veteran and multitasker, Oliverio, is on the side of bricks and mortar.

Of course, kids or their parents could pay something for the service, or schools could throw in money. And if the taxpayers keep footing the whole bill for now, well, I can't say that would be the worst outcome. If you had to pick anything we spend money on, teaching kids might come toward the top of the list.